



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
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Educational Progress Worth Celebrating

Sometimes when we're in the midst of the hard work of improving schools, it is easy to forget how far Kentucky has come.

The state – all of us – has invested in better schools in the past two decades. And the investment is paying off in students who are better prepared than they have ever been.

Over the past 20 years, Kentucky has moved to the middle of states in academic achievement. We're continuing to move upward. At the same time, other states that didn't focus on schools like we did have moved steadily downward.

Kentucky's progress is worth celebrating. Our educators deserve considerable praise for their effort, as do our elected leaders for staying the course on better schools.

But that course is getting tougher. While our students have been achieving far more, and while they look better when compared to students in other states, the rest of the world has not stood still. Indeed, students in a number of other countries have been achieving at far higher rates than students in the United States.

The world for our students is much different than it was just a few years ago. To be competitive for today's jobs, young adults will have to command as much knowledge and skills as their peers not just in other states but those in other countries.

Today's economy is global. What happens around the world – from energy prices to interest rates to technology breakthroughs – affects us quickly here. The Kentucky coal that used to be sold in our region now moves across the world; indeed, a new deal will ship \$7 billion of Kentucky coal to India.

These days, the best predictor of individual economic success is the quality of his or her education. None of us has lived in a time where education has been so important, not just to individuals but also to communities and states. At least in Kentucky, we have come to understand and act upon that reality. This is why the state has adopted higher academic standards for our students and new tests to measure their progress.

Our goals have increased to reflect that new international reality. Instead of demanding proficiency in just the basics of education, we're now expecting to get students to be ready to keep learning beyond high school; to have the knowledge and skills that make them ready for college or today's workplace.

Our students are as smart as any in the world, and we are now expecting more of them. We didn't do it arbitrarily. We did it because these are the standards of the world and we want Kentucky students to be competitive.

Now that we've released the first results from our new tests, we're seeing that we have a ways to go. The numbers of students who had been distinguished or proficient went down. This isn't because they aren't making progress, it is because we are measuring them against higher standards. We've raised the height of the basket, lengthened the football field, made the golf course longer, pushed back the outfield fences.

It would certainly be more enjoyable for me to keep the tests the way they were and see more Kentucky students get higher scores. It also would be wrong. We do our students no favors when we tell them they are ready to succeed in the world when they are not.

And we want them to succeed.

We expected the test scores to be lower, and we've been saying so. But the scores are jarring nevertheless to students and their parents, to teachers and principals, to taxpayers and to elected officials.

The new test scores can't be compared to the old ones; they measure different things.

But we know that we are making the kind of progress that matters – more of our students are leaving high school better prepared to succeed in the world. Our remediation rates in higher education are getting lower. Our ACT scores are steadily moving upward. We have moved increasingly closer to the national average, and I suspect we will surpass it in a few years if we continue to stay focused.

The scores we've released this week are lower than we want, but readiness is going up. And that is something Kentucky should be quite proud of.

Terry Holliday, Ph.D.